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"Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift."—2 Cor. ix. 15.

We have just kept the usual festival of Thanksgiving. This holiday season, beginning in New England, has now spread itself over the whole land, and has grown into a national festival, appointed annually not only by the governor of each commonwealth, but also by the President of the United States. It has thus become national and universal, because it was in accordance with the desires of the whole people. Its authority comes solely from its fitness and seasonableness. All the proclamations of all the executives could not establish it if the people themselves did not desire it. And while New England has given its Thanksgiving to the other States, it has received from them Christmas in return. In my boyhood there was no Christmas kept in New England, and no Thanksgiving kept outside of New England. Now the festival of harvest and home has gone as far as Georgia and Oregon, and the Merry Christmas of Old England has been welcomed back again by her Puritan children in Massachusetts.

The text says, "Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift." Before we consider what this unspeakable gift is, let us consider those which can be easily spoken of.

What a wonderful world is this into which we have been born! What beauty, what variety, what majestic presence

of law, what vast order, what infinite adaptations to the purposes of life! We go out on a summer morning. We see the rosy clouds hanging around the horizon where the sun is approaching. He rises, and sky and land are bathed in a sea of beauty. Thousands of little birds welcome his approach with songs of joy. The tremulous dewdrops turn to rubies and emeralds on the myriad leaves in the vast forests; little flowers open their eyes over boundless prairies. The frozen snow on the mighty summits of the mountains grows warm in the tender auroral radiance. The immeasurable smile of old ocean flashes upward along the meridian from the ices of the arctic to those of the antarctic seas. Living things go forth to breakfast on the seeds and fruits ripened under the great solar influence. Man also goes forth to his work and his labor, creating another world of art and use, a microcosm in the macrocosm. He also is allowed to be a creator in his little sphere. He builds cities, erects cathedrals, invents machinery, multiplies his force a thousand times by his discoveries, constructs navies which traverse all seas and connect the continents and their various industries. He writes books, tunes his tongue to delicious music, brings down ideal forms from heaven to earth, with imagination all compact, and embodies in lasting beauty the immortal thoughts which breathe and burn within his soul. Life is a little day; but how it is filled with opportunity for knowledge, for work, for love! It has room in it for the sublime voices of prophets, bards, leaders, reformers, saints, and martyrs. It has room for the happy homes of those whose sober wishes do not learn to stray from the cool sequestered vale of familiar affections. It has room for dear

little children, innocent infants, with an aureole of divine light around them. It has room for generosity, patience, hope, and self-denying love. It has room for pain borne without repining, for bereavement sustained by faith, for a death made sweet by an infinite hope. It has room for love of wife and husband, for the tenderness of the parent and the piety of the child. It has joys and work and duties for youth, manhood, and age. These gifts are evident; they are new every morning. God opens his hand and supplies the wants of every living thing. He is the perpetual giver. His joy is in never-ceasing creation. The fountain of his love pours forth new supplies each moment. If his gifts are perpetually passing away, it is that they may be forever renewed. If it is more blessed for man to give than to receive, this is the blessedness of God, that he has not made a world to go on by itself, but renews it every hour by perpetual creative bounty.

And what a wonderful gift is the human soul! What mysterious powers are hidden therein, slowly evolved into grand activities! How strange that each of us should be a person, forever himself, with a great gulf separating him from all other persons! I, always myself, you, always yourself, forever a pure unit of individual consciousness! And yet that this personal unit, so limited and confined, should be able to unite itself in thought with past and present, with the universe of space and time; should be able to reach out to the stars, weigh and measure the planets; should be able to recall the history of the earth and unroll its geological record; should be able to analyze substances burning in the furnaces of sun and stars; able to send by lightning its messages under the ocean and over

the continent; able to enter with sympathetic thought into the mind of Homer, Dante, and Milton; able to know Christ and love him; able to live a life of communion with eternal right and infinite good,—this is the most marvellous fact of all, and for all this we may well thank God every day and every hour.

But why should we praise God? He does not need words of praise. He cannot love praise as men desire it. He is not jealous, as earthly kings are jealous, of honor withdrawn from him or given to another. Even a good man does not desire to be praised for his goodness: he prefers to do his good works unknown of men, as Jesus recommends. He does not let his left hand know what his right hand does. How, then, can God desire the praise of his creatures?

To this many would answer: "He wishes our praise not for his own sake, but only for ours. It does us good to be grateful. Gratitude enlarges the heart: ingratitude hardens it. Therefore, God asks for our gratitude and worship, our adoration and thanksgiving, because it makes us better to render it."

This is true as far as it goes, but only half the truth. To thank God when we know that he does not desire our thanks, and takes no pleasure in them except for our good, would be a barren offering, and almost unnecessary. There is a sense in which God may enjoy the thanks of his creatures. If those thanksgivings of ours spring not from the mind only, but the heart also,—if they come from love,—then even the Infinite Majesty of Heaven may find joy in the grateful heart of creation. For love unites the high and the low. Pure love is never wasted, it never fails;

it is greater than faith and hope; it is the essential thing in prayer; it is that which makes obedience twice blessed. Who can ever despise or be indifferent to sincere love? It is the greatest gift of God to men, the only return men can make to God.

This, then, is "the unspeakable gift," the gift which makes the value of all other gifts. We do not value a gift from man unless we see in it some love. How can we be grateful for anything given only with the hand and not with the heart, given from a mere sense of duty, given by rule or custom or law? You could not be very grateful to a man even for saving your life if he did it thinking of his own glory or as a mere function of his business,—"perfunctorily," as we say. No, unless a man puts some heart into his gift, he has no right to ask for gratitude. We complain that men are not grateful for our benevolence. Are *you* grateful for anything done for you by those who do not love you, who help you merely out of self-respect or to retain the respect of others? No! There must be some element of love in a gift to make it of any value.

Real ingratitude then, the fatal ingratitude, comes from those who are unable or unwilling to recognize love in a giver. He who believes that men are only selfish, he who attributes selfish motives to all human acts, has made himself incapable of gratitude. He who reasons thus in order to justify his own selfishness cannot be grateful. No matter how generously he may be treated, he does not see the generosity: he invents some personal motive to account for it. The generous man looks for generosity, the selfish man expects selfishness, and each finds what he looks for.

The "unspeakable gift," therefore, which gives value to God's other gifts, is the love which is in them. It is "unspeakable"; for who can describe even human love, much less infinite love? But what we cannot describe we can see and know. Who can describe the perfume of a violet? Yet we know it, and know its difference from the odor of mignonette or that of a rose. Who can describe the melody in the song of a nightingale or the music of a gentle voice? But we know these, and can recall them after long years. So we may know, though we cannot describe, this unspeakable gift of Divine Love.

Men may receive all God's other gifts; and, if no love is seen in them, they will awaken no gratitude. A man of taste may be gratified, but hardly grateful, in the sight of outward beauty. It may please his ideality and imagination, but leave his heart cold. The sight of vast laws may gratify our desire for knowledge; a man may do right simply because it is right, and will find satisfaction in so doing. But the "unspeakable gift" may not be in any of these blessings.

It is not till we see love in God's gifts that we are grateful; and, when we see love, we cannot help being grateful.

But is not this the wonder of wonders, the most inexplicable and unspeakable fact,—that the Infinite Being, the Being of beings, the great order of the universe, the profound substance beneath all existence,—He who is above the reach of reason, imagination, philosophy, should not be above the reach of love? We see power everywhere, wisdom everywhere, benevolent adaptations everywhere; but before the personal Being, the great heart of the universe, there hangs an impenetrable veil. To the intellect

this mystery is unfathomable. But there was one human soul able to draw aside that veil, one who from the first spoke of God as *Father*. The inspired heart of Jesus went to a depth far below that of the philosophic reason. It came near to the heart of God. And so he was a revelation, never before made, of the *Father*. Therefore he who has seen him has seen the Father. No one comes to the Father but by him. We can come to the Infinite Being by the broad highway of reason. Plato shows us the divine element in all human nature. Spinoza shows us a divine substance beneath all phenomena. Science, star-eyed, brings us to-day no doctrine of despair, but announces power above law, behind force, supremely divine. But who except Jesus has revealed the deeper mystery of divine love? To him alone it was given to show to mankind that within all other gifts is this "unspeakable gift" of love. There have, indeed, been mystics in all religions, who have sought by ascetic practices, by solitary prayer, by monastic self-denial, to purify themselves so as to meet God in their soul. But Jesus brings God's love to all,—not to the thinker or the monk or the anchorite only, but to the humblest child of the Infinite Friend. The sailor on the high and giddy mast can feel beneath him the everlasting arms. The young soldier, dying in pain on the battlefield, can say, "My Father!" and be at peace. The sinner in the midst of temptation can utter in his heart a cry for help, and be pardoned and saved. The little child can talk with this dear Father, and its childish prattle will reach the infinite ear.

This is the key to the ardent language of Paul. This is why he forever repeats the name of Christ. This is why

he says we are rooted and grounded in love. To Paul there came from Jesus this divine revelation of a great Fatherhood, and it broke the bonds of his Pharisaic literalism, of his routine religion, took him out of his ritual, ceremonies, texts of Scripture, into a new life of perfect trust and hope and joy. "To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." "The life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God." "I live, but not I, Christ lives in me." Christ to him was the manifestation of a divine tenderness, of which he had never before dreamed. So that, no matter what happened to him, he was sitting in heavenly places with Jesus; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.

And this unspeakable gift was not given to Jesus alone or to Paul alone, but is given to you and to me. To us the word of this salvation is also sent. Salvation! for what can be more safe than to feel ourselves in the embrace of an infinite love? Salvation! for we know that our sins will be destroyed and our evil cleansed by coming into this heavenly atmosphere of love. Salvation! for how can we continue to sin if we are kept in the presence of our Father?

Draw near, then, in faith, to this great, overflowing fountain of heavenly compassion. God has put into our hearts his spirit, to enable us all to say, "Our Father!" Let nothing separate us from his love,—neither life nor death, nor our own folly and sin, our own weakness and ignorance, our own doubt or unbelief. Let us not be troubled by harsh doctrines. God asks for none of these things at our hands. Sacrifice and offering he does not require,—not the sacrifice of our own reason before unin-

telligible mysteries. He says only this: "My child, give me thy heart!" And, to enable us to do so, he shows his own love to every soul that he has made,—shows how he leaves the ninety-and-nine in the wilderness and goes after the one sheep that is lost; how he so loved the world as to give the only one who had risen to the height of perfect Sonship—his only Son—to bring the same sense of a Father's love to the rest of his children. He allowed this dearest child to die, in torture and shame, that we by that solemn sacrifice might be lifted out of darkness into marvellous light. So now we can behold in all his gifts this unspeakable gift of a Fatherly love. Now every outward blessing has in it a touch of divine tenderness. Now we see in the universe not only beauty and wonder, power, order, law, but, interfused and penetrating all things, that highest of all created things,—a Divine Love. Hold fast to it: let it not go, for it is your life! To trust in the Father's love is the gospel within the gospel; it is the inmost secret of Christianity; it is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.